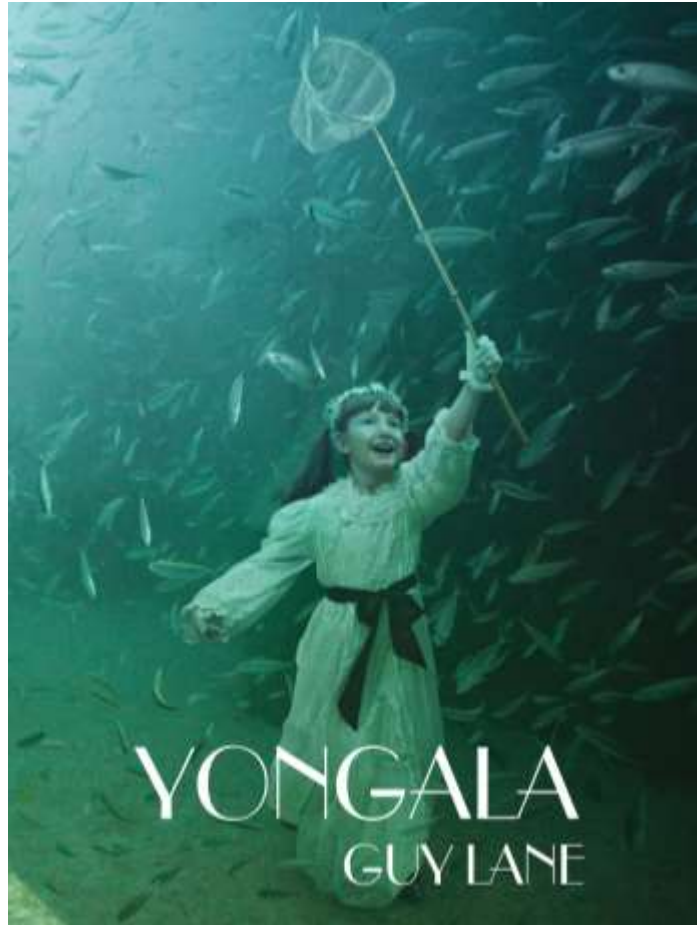


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Cover of the novel *Yongala* by Guy Lane, featuring the image *Sarah* by Andreas Franke from The Sinking World collection.

Sustainability Themes in Fiction Writing

Guy Lane

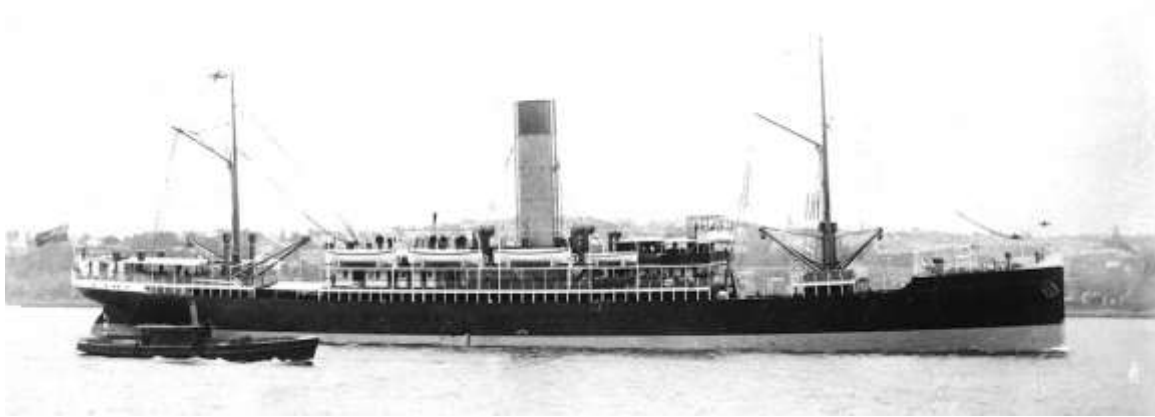
The purpose of Australian novelist Guy Lane's fiction writing is to help normalize the conversation about sustainability. At present, only a small percentage of the public talks about climate science and sustainability. The opportunity exists to bring these ideas to a wider audience through popular fiction.

The challenge is to embed the sustainability themes so that they do not become didactic or overt, and thus distract from the flow of the story. Fiction novels are not text-books, and themes need to be divulged subtly, with the intent that they work their way into the subconscious of the reader.

This writing process allows Guy to cover a broad range of sustainability themes, including Planetary Boundaries, the Blue Economy, Eradicating Ecocide, the rise of the global Superclass, algae biofuels, and the role of the mainstream media in keeping us all in the dark. Guy's writing process has three distinct levels: theme, context, characters and plot.

In the story [Yongala](#) – a historical fiction piece set on the steamship of the same name – the theme is climate science. In particular, the book considers that scientists have understood

the basics of global warming since the turn of the 20th century. In 1905, Swedish physicist Svante Arrhenius released a book called [*Worlds in the Making*](#), saying that doubling atmospheric CO₂ by burning coal would increase global average temperatures by 4 degrees Celsius. It is particularly relevant that these numbers are consistent with the contemporary climate models run on supercomputers.



Yongala, 1907, from the Allan C. Green collection of glass negatives held by the State Library of Victoria.

Lane's writing process embeds this theme into a context. In the case of *Yongala*, the context is the final, fateful voyage of the steamship Yongala. On March 20, 1911, Yongala departed Brisbane, Queensland, heading for Townsville. She didn't make it, sinking in a tropical cyclone on the night of 23 March with the loss of all 120 people aboard. A coal burning ship suffering an extreme weather event is deemed to be an appropriate context for a story about climate science.

The third level of *Yongala* is the characters and plot. In the story, 13-year-old Felicity Cumberland escorts her uncle, Professor Portland, and his renewable energy invention, the Smoke Engine, to Townsville aboard Yongala. Fed with biomass, the Smoke Engine uses pyrolysis to produce wood gas that can be burnt in an internal combustion engine, thus providing climate friendly energy. Fearing for their interests, the Queensland Coal Board pay alcoholic war veteran Corben Plath to kill Portland and throw the Smoke Engine into the Coral Sea. Aboard Yongala, Plath develops an innocent friendship with Felicity, not realizing who she is. As the ship steams into heavy weather, Plath finds that his own salvation depends on the young girl surviving the storm.

Through *Yongala*, Lane seeks to create a story that finds its way into the consciousness of an audience who may have never considered climate change. In this way, he seeks to plant a seed, a simple idea that it's okay to talk about global warming, because people have been doing just that for a very long time.

See Yongala and Lane's other books here: guylane.com

This post is part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) –an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the [MAHB Arts Community](#) to share and reflect on how art can promote critical

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MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/sustainability-themes-fiction/>